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**ЭКСПЕРИМЕНТАЛЬНОЕ  
ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ПЕСЕН  
НА УРОКЕ  
ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА  
КАК СПОСОБ  
ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНОГО  
РАЗВИТИЯ  
ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЯ**

**EXPERIMENTAL USE  
OF SONGS IN A LANGUAGE  
CLASSROOM  
AS A WAY  
FOR A TEACHER'S  
PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT**

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается один из способов самостоятельного профессионального развития преподавателя иностранного языка — экспериментирование с новыми подходами и методами на примере использования песен в обучении взрослых.

Ключевые слова: песни, экспериментальная практика, обучение иностранному языку, профессиональное развитие.

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Abstract. The article is concerned with one of the ways of autonomous professional development for a language teacher — experimenting with new approaches and techniques such as using songs in teaching adults.

Keywords: songs, experimental practice, language teaching, professional development.

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Any good language teacher should be constantly seeking professional development. One of the most effective ways is trying out new approaches and techniques, or "experimental practice"

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which allows teachers to step out of their "comfort zone", adds variety to their classroom practice and provides a break from their standard routine, at the same time being an invaluable tool for professional development. Undoubtedly, experimenting with alternative practices needs thorough preparation, exploring approaches or procedures unfamiliar for the teacher, as well as doing action research — reflecting on their experiment effectiveness for the teacher and their learners.

In this article I am going to describe one of my attempts to do so. I have decided to choose songs as the focus of my "experimental practice" for several reasons. My learners have asked me quite a few times for help with the lyrics of some songs in English they particularly like and want to know the exact words of. Some of my learners quoted words and even phrases they heard in a song by association with something that arose in the lesson. I have even advised many of my learners to listen to songs in English in order to 'train their ear' for the sounds of the language and to pick up some vocabulary and structures. But I have never tried to use songs as a language teaching and learning tool in my lessons, let alone structured a whole lesson around a song. My only experience of using songs in lessons was probably having some Christmas songs as background music for pre-Christmas lessons.

One of the reasons for my reluctance to use songs may be the fact that being a rather reserved person with a bad ear for music, I know I won't be able to accompany my learners if they wish to sing along or even to keep a proper cheerful face. Moreover, as I mostly teach adults, I've been doubtful as to whether they would perceive it as effective methodology or reject it as something not worth their serious attention.

So, I saw experimental practice as a good opportunity to test this as well as to do some background reading and research for which we, teachers, usually don't have time in our busy working routine. I hoped this would enhance my learners' motivation for learning English by providing some variety and adding an element of fun to the lessons, and make them more productive and memorable for the learners, as well as encourage me to use songs in my future teaching practice.

Songs and music have been part of our life for as long as we can remember — we sing or listen to them to relax or to cheer up, when

we celebrate or grieve, when happy or sad, when alone or in company. They are an important part of any national culture and as part of cultural and linguistic identity reflecting values and beliefs they undoubtedly deserve a place in a language classroom.

Songs have been used in teaching foreign languages for quite a long time, as they became available for classroom use long before the advent of such technologies as video-cassette recorders, DVDs, let alone the omnipresent super-powerful Internet. The latter, however, made their use even easier, giving access to the whole heritage of the world music and songs.

There are multiple reasons for this extensive use, one of them being the fact that songs, which are a pleasant constant background noise to our lives, play a great role in LI acquisition. It is well-known that young children learn a lot of words and phrases through songs, not necessarily those written specifically for kids — all of us have heard children repeating lyrics that are not quite appropriate for a child but that stuck in their heads after a single repetition due to the extreme attractiveness of the rhymes or sound/music combinations.

Many experts in ELT have given their attention to songs as an effective language learning tool with high affective, cognitive and linguistic potential agreeing on the many advantages they offer as well as on their disadvantages [Thornbury 2006; Davanellos 1999; Schoepp 2001].

#### Advantages: Songs

- are an entertaining, fun, enjoyable and memorable way of contextualizing language;
- motivate learners, provide variety and change of dynamics; lower the 'affective filter', relax and enhance learner involvement;
- promote learner autonomy — independent learning outside classroom through extensive exposure to songs;
- repeated replays — easily tolerated by learners (unlike with most other listening texts) which helps language automatization;
- have inbuilt repetition (e.g. the chorus lines are repeated) — potential source of incidental learning;
- mnemonic quality — words/chunks are highly memorable in combination with rhythm and melody;

- display instances of high-frequency everyday and idiomatic language, including formulaic expressions;
- are imbued with significant cultural information;
- demonstrate playful, expressive and creative use of language;
- are personal — refer to generic themes, so it's easy to identify with the lyrics;
- are easy to find.

#### Downsides:

- lyrics of authentic songs are ungraded, often colloquial and ungrammatical by conventional standards;
- can be difficult to interpret due to creative language use;
- not all learners consider them a serious learning tool;
- difficult to cater for all learners' musical tastes;
- time-consuming — finding suitable songs and devising learning materials to go with them.

Songs that are used for L2 teaching can be of two different types:

- authentic songs, carefully selected because of their content (use of a specific grammatical structure, topically related vocabulary or those devoted to a specific theme);
- songs specially written and recorded for study purposes (e.g. jazz chants, grammar songs by Hancock) — designed to display a particular language feature.

However, many learners 'prefer the challenge of listening to authentic songs, for all their difficulties' [Thornbury 2006:207], especially if they have been chosen by the learners themselves, and 'the popularity of 'EFL songs' for adults has waned» [ibid].

#### Classroom applications [Thornbury-2006, Hancock-1998]:

- purely for the pleasure of listening to them and for any resulting incidental learning;

- as 'karaoke' — with learners singing along to a song;

#### to practice listening skills:

- gist-listening — inferring the author's/singer's mood/attitude/ emotions/opinions, identifying the described scenario; recognizing function (e.g. promising/reminiscing/complaining), discourse type — dialogue/narrative/self-addressed/mental monologue, note-taking, picture selection- matching the song mood/content;

- listening for detail — word-spotting, gap-filling, error-finding, pictures/lines sequencing, true/false, dictation, comprehension questions, picture differences — identifying inaccuracies in song-illustrating pictures, etc;
- to focus on form — raising language awareness — depending on the content — grammar, syntax, vocabulary or pronunciation:
- exploiting the lyrics as an exercise — filling lexical gaps in the transcript, transformation tasks — active-into-passive, phonemic script-to-letter script, pronunciation drilling — connected speech features/intonation, tense-selecting, error-identifying, word-ordering, predicting rhyming words, creating own lyrics imitating the song pattern, etc;
- as a language sample for analysis: answering concept questions about grammar features, searching for antonyms/lexical fields/synonyms, identifying pronunciation patterns, sound/stress/search, etc;
- to generate content/ideas/language and provide the stimulus for follow-up speaking/writing/reading skills enhancement activities; to provide topics for extension and discussion activities — describing the song characters' personality, speculating about the possible continuation of the song story, giving advice, role-playing the characters, discussing alternative interpretations of the song message, discussing the song cultural context, summarizing the events, provoking a personal response — learners talking about their reaction.

Songs are an effective tool that increases motivation and facilitates retention (memorization) of vocabulary and language patterns amongst language learners.

### Experimental lesson

In the experimental lesson I intended to find out whether my hypothesis would be confirmed; that is, whether the learners would be more motivated than in other (more conventional) lessons and whether they would be able to better remember the vocabulary items (chunks) presented through a song — retain more of them than they would without it.

To prove the hypothesis I needed to assess learners' involvement in the lesson and the amount of language retained.

I tested vocabulary retention by including a specially designed anonymous questionnaire and in one of the lessons to follow I quickly checked what items they could recall (by eliciting with and without prompting — prompts will be in the form of pictures or key words to elicit the rest of the idioms) to evaluate how much they took in. The questionnaire also included some questions that check the learners' subjective perception of the lesson.

The learners' engagement and the practical outcomes of the lesson were assessed using observer questionnaires for the peers who were observing my lesson which also contained some open questions to give an overall opinion of the lesson.

In addition, I reflected on the lesson myself for affective changes within the group, quantity and quality of language work. Besides, I had a post-lesson discussion with the observers to evaluate the experimental lesson in terms of my and the learners' outcomes.

This triangulated approach gave me a clear picture of the success of the lesson and guidelines for the future application of the selected experimental techniques.

The class I chose for my experiment is a monolingual class at pre-intermediate level. They are eager to communicate but insufficient language command puts serious constraints on their ability to express themselves, especially with weaker students. So, extending their vocabulary with idioms would be beneficial for them, especially in terms of making their language more natural and expressive.

Using a song that contains a lot of idioms following the same pattern repeated many times ("Everything at once" written and performed by Lenka) provided an entertaining and memorable context for the target vocabulary (the learners listened to it at least 5 times). The learners were very likely to retain the idioms by association with the song, the whole lesson situation and positive emotions connected with it.

Listening skills were also practiced, especially word recognition/identifying word boundaries, getting the general idea.

I devised several activities aimed at facilitating this and preparing learners for listening by clarifying vocabulary and raising their awareness of the idioms structure and meaning — labeling pictures

showing animals and objects from the song, finding rhyming words, trying to make similes from the words (e.g. *as sly as a fox*).

The "while-listening" activities were of different types to provide variety and break the song down into more manageable chunks — filling in the gaps, putting lines in the correct order, correcting mistakes.

I also hoped this lesson would show learners that understanding authentic songs is feasible and encourage them to listen to more songs outside classroom paying more conscious attention to the lyrics.

The feedback on the lesson from my peers, the learners and my own assessment of the lesson were mostly positive. My peers also gave me some useful recommendations on how to improve the lesson flow and exploit the songs in an even more productive and entertaining way.

It definitely fulfilled all my teaching objectives and allowed me to assess future use of songs in class. The learners' objectives were also met as by the end of the lesson they demonstrated good understanding of the idioms from the song and their meanings and in our next lesson they were able to recall some of them as well as to make their own similes following the same pattern (as + adjective/adverb + as (a) + noun), some of which were very creative, which proves that the learners really understood the figurative use of such word combinations.

Overall, the lesson results confirmed the hypothesis showing a strong learning facilitation potential of songs. Most importantly, they show that acquiring new vocabulary, especially collocations and idioms, may largely benefit from the motivational and structuring properties of music and lyrics in songs.

In spite of all the minor drawbacks of my first experience using songs in the lesson I intend to integrate activities based on songs into my teaching practice.

Undoubtedly, I need to take everything that I was able to learn from this first experimental lesson (including the invaluable feedback from colleagues and learners) into account when preparing for future song-lessons.

I am going to do more research into ways of using songs for different purposes, other than grammar and vocabulary work, especially for more productive skills-focused activities/lessons. I will also take time to research different songs in English and try to work out how to use them creatively and effectively for the learners' benefit and learning progress. I will experiment with using songs as often as possible in my lessons with different levels to refine my understanding and practice.

Doing background research, planning and teaching this lesson has given me a lot of food for thought, and a strong motivation to further this experiment and to incorporate songs in my teaching to make learning English more effective and enjoyable for my learners.

Experimental practice like the one I have described is one of the least time-consuming, yet most effective and manageable ways to move off the beaten track and stay up-to date with the recent ELT methodology trends, which is vital for continuous professional development of a language teacher.

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